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10 December, 1994

Notes on James Hershberg, James Conant

Critical to a willingness or desire to see the Bomb dropped, and not merely possessed or actively threatened, were:

--A rejection of absolute Just War constraints; an acceptance of a Necessity Defense even for large-scale massacre; a belief that US wartime (and postwar) aims in WWII could justify such massacre, if necessary (or in the case of postwar aims of international control of nuclear weapons, might even make its use necessary).

--A sense of postwar US goals that might be served by use, even if use was not necessary for wartime objectives;

--A sense that public opinion must be manipulated, by creating or exploiting events that would change it in the desired direction.

--the goal of "unconditional surrender"--both of Germany and of Japan--which tended to rule out less violent approaches or a willingness to negotiate with them (or even make our terms explicit).

Conant was personally committed to these points of view, and even to expressing them publicly, as early as 1940-41; and they all affected his own recommendation on the no-warning no-negotiation use of the Bomb against civilians on May 31 1945. He was, at that time, far from coming to that question without prior reflection or commitment. (pp. 123-132, 135, 142

--148-49: In the summer of 1941, the MAUD Committee seems to have recommended a "crash program to develop a weapon" simply on the basis of its feasibility and destructiveness: "the destructive effect, both material and moral [sic], is so great that very effort should be made to produce bombs of this kind."

Their prediction was that 25 lbs of U-235 would yield 1800 tons of TNT "and would also release large quantities of radioactive substances, which would make places near to where the bomb exploded dangerous to human life for a long period." 149

On last point: note that this danger was seen in the very beginning. Also, it is in some contradiction to Conant's claim about the meaning of unconditional surrender, which he espoused, even as he foresaw using the bombs against Germany: "But, let me add once more that unconditional surrender of Germany which I believe to be the first of our peace aims does not mean that the victors will impose a Carthaginian peace." 152 (Oct. 22, 1941, letter to Grenville Clark).

Did this prediction not temper the Committee's enthusiasm for

this bomb at all?

Meanwhile, the prediction of 1.8 KT for a uranium bomb may have made it look more usable as a battlefield weapon than a 20KT bomb. So the crash effort was launched with the hope of achieving what came to be calculated as the "fizzle yield" of a uranium bomb, now derided in Japan as a "firecracker."

--On December 6, 1941, Conant told Briggs, Lawrence and Arthur Compton "that FDR had approved an 'all-out' research and planning effort to determine the feasibility of atomic explosives." 153

(As of November, those closest to the program had developed a hardening conviction that the bomb was in fact possible, and within a few years).

--[Imagine now defining Manhattan Project II in similar terms, addressed to what I said two-three years ago was a major uncertainty: the feasibility and nature or design of abolition of nuclear weapons, and the process by which it might be achieved.

The rationale would be that without a sense of the feasibility of this objective, and of nuclear weapons' states commitment to seeking and achieving it, it may be impossible to stop proliferation by creating a sufficiently effective non-proliferation regime.

--UCS: December 22, 1941: "enormous changes in airplanes and aerial warfare are certainly in the cards." Nothing less than total victory was acceptable, he told the Plaza Hotel audience, because in 'a state ruled by a dictator, covered by a Gestapo, new weapons can be devised, developed and manufactured with utmost secrecy."

[Note that this proved possible for democracies, not only in wartime in the US, but in "peacetime" in England, France, Israel, and India.]

"During a period armistice it might well happen that such radical developments could occur as to make a complete victory possible in a few months once the fighting was resumed." "Grim necessity requires," Conant concluded, "that unconditional surrender of the Axis Powers be the first war aim of the United States."

154

In the summer of 1941, "sagging interventionist fortunes" [renewal of Selective Service won by only one vote in the House in August) "alarmed Conant even more than might be expected because, significantly, his secret conversion to belief in the feasibility of atomic weapons had already begun to affect his outlook on the international situation. Already convinced that at the end of the war the United States should impose a 'Pax Americana' and divide the European continent into 'a series of small agricultural states,' Conant now added a covert nuclear calculation--the chance

that Germany might develop atomic weapons meant that the war had to be not only won but won quickly and decisively."

[I.e., the war must be won before Germany developed nuclear weapons; and decisively, unconditionally, so that Germany could not use peace or armistice to develop such weapons and then renew the war. This was Szilard's reasoning, as well: which led him to wish to develop the weapons fast, not only to deter Hitler but to use them to win the war quickly and decisively. Presumably Conant felt the same, given his rejection of Just War constraints in such a war.]

"The Germans can never win this war, and we shall win it unless they are ahead of us in the development of the atomic bomb."
155: JBC to Harvey Bundy, Christmas 1941.

If one imagines outcomes to be only winning or losing, the above proposition would seem self-contradictory; who would win, unless the Germans, if they were ahead in acquiring the Bomb?

But there is no contradiction if C meant that if they got a few bombs first, they could use them, not to win, but to achieve a compromise peace, an armistice, a peace on terms that would permit them to proceed to build up a nuclear arsenal (and perhaps prevent us from doing the same!) which would allow them to win the next confrontation. That would have been a shrewd recognition of an asymmetry in the situation: that because of geography, and aerial access with non-nuclear weapons to Germany (which they could not match against the US without nuclear weapons) a few nuclear weapons made much more difference to Germany than to the US (or to Britain, after 1943).

Thus, even if Germany had a few bombs, and the US had none or did not use any, Germany could not "win" the war, the US would "win" by any previous standards: but it might not win unconditionally, with the total elimination of the Nazi regime and its ability to make war or to pursue its nuclear arsenal. The US might then lose the next war, or a later continuation of this one.

"We'll win the war unless the Germans get S-1 first." Even then, if they only had one or a few, the US would win, but only on terms; the Germans might win more decisively if they found a way to get a dozen or more.

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Conant was one of the first to call for "unconditional surrender" against the Nazis (not, I presume, against Japan: this was before Pearl Harbor, I believe). The precedent for this was the Civil War.

The point, no doubt, was to emphasize that it was the aim to take over sovereignty and governmental authority in the enemy nation, to destroy and remake the existing "constitutional" order, to have a kind of "revolution-from-outside" function and power or to sponsor revolutionary change in the regime.

(Has there been a case in which UCS was not compatible with the "assurances" that hst gave to Japan: no intent to annihilate or incarcerate the whole nation? What other assurances could be seen as compatible with UCS: as, Grew felt, assurance on the Emperor was, for Japan? Was there any comparable discussion in the USG about clarifying or modifying UCS for Germany?)

For this reason--including, the illegitimacy of the existing enemy regime (and also, probably, a presumed unreliability of any promises or contracts it might make)--no negotiation of any sort was deemed appropriate with the enemy. (This very much complicated the end-game in the Pacific--perhaps also in Germany?--and prolonged the Pacific War, and led to the use of the atomic bomb).

Note that this principle of no-negotiation extended into the Cold War (in which, again, Conant played a major role!)

Was it not again associated with a kind of UCS aim: in which the legitimacy of the opposing regime was not accepted, its possible promises or offers were not believed nor to be trusted or even sought or attended to, no concessions were to be made or trades sought (see Cuba II), no "diplomatic or moral equality or equality before the 'law' was to be acknowledged, and a revolutionary aim was to be pursued?! Again, a corollary was: no negotiation: a hallmark of the Cold War as in WWII!

(And again: a reliance on, and presumed legitimacy of, nuclear threats and preparations for nuclear war! A total lack of constraint in acceptable threats of violence, or terrorism. The opponent is seen as a terrorist regime, against whom terrorist threats are seen as legitimate and necessary.)

An international "civil war"! (See Bosnia: and the uses of genocide, or terrorist slaughter.)